



There is something fascinating about reading and watching movies about how some people have escaped from Prison. Recently there has been a TV series called “Prison Break” that many people have gotten hooked on. But most of us have our own favourite movie about how someone escaped from jail. Movies like “The Count of Monte Cristo”, or “The Great Escape” with Steve McQueen, “Escape from Alcatraz” with Clint Eastwood or my favourite “Shawshank Redemption” with Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman.

This past week I have been reading about some amazing prison breaks. For example, in 1864 during the civil war, Colonel Thomas E Rose was one of 1,200 Union officers crammed into a former grocer's warehouse in Richmond, Virginia. He dug his way to freedom with a few colleagues by digging a 50 foot tunnel using pocket knives and pieces of scrap wood. Their tunnel started in the store's cellar and ended in an empty shed. Rose was so proud of the quality of the tunnel he had dug that he returned to the jail a few days later and led another 15 men to freedom. In all, 93 Union officers used the route, prompting even the Confederate Richmond Examiner to describe the feat as ‘an extraordinary escapade’. Most of us have read or seen the movie “Catch me if you Can” with Leonardo DiCaprio which tells the story of Frank Agagnale’s life. As a kid, I read the book and was enthralled as I read how on one occasion, after he had been caught by the police and was being transported to jail in a DC10, he went to the washroom and was able to use the toilet to get out of the plane by crawling through the hole in the floor boards and then escape through the baggage compartment just as the plane landed.

Having reminded you of some of these great escapes and prison breaks, let me take you to one that surpasses them all. Turn to Acts 12. This fall I am so excited about our preaching series. It will be called ‘Looking Ahead through The Rear View Mirror’. We will be studying the life of the Apostle Paul. We will be putting together the teachings from the book of Acts with some of the things we discovered in Turkey, with practical and (I hope) profound ways it should affect how we live as Christians today. However, we have far more in this fantastic book of Acts than we can cover in 11 weeks, so as we begin to prepare for this fall, let me wet your appetite for the book of Acts as well as look at truths that will be helpful for us as a church this fall. Acts 12 talks about the most amazing prison break in history. It speaks about the fact that: Our enemy is real, our God is great and we are placed together for a reason.

## **I. Let me remind you that - Our enemy is Real**

Acts 12:1- 4. Let me just give you the setting for this passage. It is one of those times when little details make a huge difference. The story begins on the Feast of Unleavened Bread (10 ½ months after Pentecost) a few days before the Passover Feast. Actually, it is within days of the 1st anniversary of Jesus' death and Resurrection. Now think back to what has happened in the last year. It had been a year full of unbelievable excitement. Jesus rose from the dead and promised that the Holy Spirit would come in power. It was a promise that He kept, for as Peter preached a year ago at Pentecost, all Heaven broke in and thousands followed Jesus. As they preached, people who were disabled were healed. As they sought God's guidance they received words of knowledge about Ananias and Sapphira who had lied to them. As they wondered about reaching out to the Gentiles, God gave them dreams about what to do. The church had been founded, deacons chosen, their first martyred had died, but he had died receiving a glimpse into heaven. The list of those saved included Simeon the Soccer, the Ethiopian Finance Minister, Cornelius the Roman officer and Saul, the Christian killer who was now one of their key evangelists. It had been quite a year. Yes, there had been struggles. Yes, persecution had forced some to flee from Jerusalem, but Jesus had proved he was God. And the Holy Spirit had indeed come to walk with them in a supernatural way.

If you turn back to Acts 11, you will see that just days before, Barnabus and Paul had arrived in Jerusalem bringing with them money raised from the new Gentile churches. It had happened because a man named Agabus had a prophetic dream that a famine was coming to Jerusalem and that the Christians there would need help. So before the famine happened, the funds had arrived from their Gentile daughter churches to help. It must have been a very exciting time to attend First Baptist Church in Jerusalem!

I'll bet that they had already struck a committee for the 1st Anniversary celebration of Jesus' resurrection. I'll bet they had a great party in the planning stages. But, we know that when the work of the Lord is going well, we can expect Satan to attack. [Now of course, we need to be careful not to give the devil too much credit, for much that enters our lives is due to sin or the result of the circumstances of life.] If we are to be biblical Christians we need to also be very aware that there is more at work in our lives as Christians than what we can see with our eyes. Ephesians 6:10-12.

What I have observed over the years, is that often right before God is about to do something wonderful in His people's lives or right afterwards, the devil loves to come along and steal our joy. For example, right before Moses was to give the Children of Israel the 10 Commandments, Israel (God's people) built and worshipped the Golden Calf. Right after Elijah had prayed down fire from heaven on Mount Carmel, wicked Queen Jezebel sent her soldiers to kill him and discouragement overwhelmed him. Right before Jesus' ministry began, He underwent 40 days of temptation in the desert. And right before His crucifixion, 2 of His best friends let Him down and broke His heart (Judas betrayed Him and Peter denied knowing Him). I Peter 5:8, 9 says it is an old tactic/pattern that the devil has often used among us Christians. We need to understand that as God uses us as individuals and as a Church, some of the good things that happen that will have eternal consequence, will result in the devil's displeasure and because of that he will attack us as the people of God. That is not being paranoid. It is being realistic, so that we can be prepared. Like the old adage says: 'Just because you're not paranoid doesn't mean that people (or the devil) aren't out to get you'.

Now, don't miss the timing of James' execution. It happened in the midst of tremendous blessing, just days before the Christians were to celebrate their first Easter Season. Don't miss the magnitude of who it was that died. It was James the brother of John, one of the Zebedee boys. He was one of the inner circle of the 3 closest friends of Jesus, so he would have been a key leader in the church. He was John's brother (who later wrote the book of Revelation). He was Peter's best friend and fishing partner from boyhood. His death would have rattled the teeth of the entire Christian community. Don't miss how he died - he was beheaded. Because King Herod wanted to have the Romans love him, he killed James by using a Roman method of execution not a Jewish one. Don't miss that the church went from planning a party to celebrate a year of amazing victories, to planning a funeral for one of the key leaders in their movement. Satan our enemy, seeing what was God was doing, attacked the church in such a way as to take away their joy and sadden their hearts.

I tell you this so that as God moves among us in new and exciting ways this fall (as I believe He will) that we need to be vigilant and prayerful. So if we see attacks from Satan we won't be surprised, but will instead see it as a power encounter, a back handed compliment by the devil

himself and so we will keep our spiritual tools sharp and at hand and have our spiritual guard raised.

Can I add a frank word of caution? When I look back over many years of ministry, I have seen a pattern that has happened far too often. Right in the midst of a time God is blessing, right after a great sermon, baptism or some very evident work of God, someone inevitably seems to appear at that exact moment in time bringing a word of discouragement or a word that causes disharmony within the church. And here is the most disturbing thing; often those discouraging words come out of the mouths of Christians. Like in Jesus' case, it was a Peter (a believer/his friend) who broke Jesus' heart as He walked toward the cross which was a profound time for Jesus. Often I have seen well meaning Christian people who are completely convinced of the validity of their argument come bringing those discouraging words exactly before or during a time when God has brought into my heart excitement and joy in Him. With a few words they steal my joy and stop others from resting for a while in the joy of what God has done. I wouldn't bring this up if I hadn't seen it happen so often in my life and the lives of so many others at the exact moment that would cause the joy of the Lord to be stolen away. It has happened too often to be a coincidence. That is why I bring it up today. Now I am not saying that when issues stir ones soul that we don't need to take it to our church leadership. I am not saying that there aren't times when we need to speak up and speak the truth that God has laid on our hearts. What I am saying is that if you and I see a pattern where our words seem to routinely be *joy stealers* to those around us, or as we examine our heart we find a pattern (if we are honest with ourselves) that we are coming and speaking with the fruit of the spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, etc.) noticeably absent to us and those around us, then we need to understand that as well meaning as we are, we aren't being the 'encourager of the brethren' we thought we were. Instead, let's leave the title of the 'discouraging of the brethren' to the devil.

As believers, let's not be surprised when in the midst of God's blessings we sense the devil pushing back against us. Let's put on the armour of God and then together, let's join hands and hearts and stand against any attacks he brings our way. Let's remember that no matter what the devil brings our way we know that as Romans 8 says, nothing can separate us from the close presence of our God. Now let me encourage you.

## II. Let me remind you that - Our God is Great

Acts 12:4, 5. So the battle had begun. Herod threw Peter in jail. History on Herod – He was ruler because his grand dad Herod Agrippa (who was so afraid he would lose his throne that he had his wife, 3 sons and many relatives executed), he was the one who killed all the babies at the time of Jesus' birth. We know that he was much like his granddad, actually he was good friends with Emperor Caligula (not good). Herod wanted to score brownie points with the Jews, so he grabbed Peter and threw him in jail since the Jews saw an act of aggression against the Christians as an act of support for them. However, if you look at verse 4, you will see that Peter was pretty well guarded. Why? If you turn back to Acts 5:18, you will see that Herod knew that Peter had a habit of getting out of jail (verses 18, 19, 23). So Peter was guarded by 4 squads of soldiers – 2 chained to him and then 2 more guards at the door and 4 more at the outer doors, and they were rotated every 6 hours so they would stay fresh and alert. However, the night before the trial which everyone knew would be followed by a quick execution, something fantastic happened. Verse 7, an angel appeared and light filled the whole cell. But Peter didn't notice it because he was fast asleep on the eve of his execution. Peter wasn't trying to dig his way out of jail, he was fast asleep! Now, it wasn't that Peter didn't think he was going to die, for he knew his life long friend James had died after spending his last night possibly in this same cell. Peter was somehow experiencing what so many of you have experienced in the midst of some of the greatest times of struggle or loss in your life – "...the peace of God that surpassed our understanding ..." (Philippians 4:6-8). His conscience was clean and his confidence in Jesus was complete, so he slept like a baby the night before he was to die.

How do we get there? For me it means keeping on taking my needs to the Lord until I am able to pry my fingers off of it and let God hold onto it for me. The result for Peter was that he was so sound asleep that the angel had to cuff him to wake him up. (My dad would come into my room as a kid and sing "you've got to get up, you've got to get up, in the morning". I would have chosen the angel shaking me over that.) And as Peter stands up, the guards don't notice or hear the clanking of the chains as they fall off his wrists and hit the floor. Verse 8, I love this: 'put on your coat and sandals' (as if to say 'it would be a real shame after rescuing you if you caught a cold and died'). God is interested in the details of our lives. So, Peter

mechanically did what he was told, not really sure if he was dreaming or not, and pulls off the greatest prison break in history. He passes the first set of guards, then the second set and then as they come to the huge iron gate at the front of the prison, it opens all by itself, probably squeaking on it's hinges. Peter walks through the gate and heads on down the street. Verse 11, I think Peter thought he had been dreaming, so he pinches himself and when it hurt (I think he laughed until he cried), he realized what God had just done. Now verse 12. So he decides to go to where he knew the church would be meeting (probably where his wife would be). Look down at verse 19. I think Herod was afraid that the God of Peter might pay him a visit so the man who thought he held Peter's life in his hands got out of town while he could. He stayed out of town for a while too. What a story. When all looked black and it looked completely hopeless, God did a miracle. They locked the preacher in. but they couldn't lock God out. There is no explanation for how Peter escaped but that the power of God moved in!!

That is what keeps me in this job. It is that time after time, I have seen God move in at moments, just as in Peter's life, and God releases people from things that have bound and threatened their lives and futures. I have sat with people who tell of God's wonderful intervention in their lives. I see God not only set people free, but lead them into a new life that is beyond what they had even dreamed possible.

Henry Hilderbrant (Founder of BBI) was flying in a plane on a cold winter day in BC when all of a sudden the engine stalled. (Later they found out that someone by mistake had put antifreeze instead of oil in engine.) They tried to find a place to land and could only find a small patch of field between the trees where the snow was still 3 - 4 ft deep. He said that as they were about to crash, time seemed to stand still. He thought of his family, work and he said that like Peter, 'my conscious was clean and my confidence was complete and I said "Lord, it is in your hands"'. When they crash landed, they did 7 end over ends and he came to a halt, hanging upside down in his seat belt, unharmed. God's power hasn't changed. We have seen evidence of that as people have become believers lately, and as we've seen God's hand and whispered promises concerning the upcoming fall season. So I want to remind you as we enter this fall that we need to pray for and expect more of God's power in this place. Come expecting God to do some wonderful things in the life of our congregation, but also in your own life.

### III. I want to remind you - We are together for a Reason

We will speak more about this next week, but let me give you 2 things that we see in this passage concerning how we are to move together as believers.

i) We are called to be there for each other. What I can guarantee is that in life we will all get our turn where we need the care of those around us. Peter was the lead pastor in the Church, but in this case, this strong man of God needed not only care for himself, but I believe he also needed others to care for his wife during this time of need. The more I read the book of Acts the more I believe that God not only made us to need each other but he expects it to be a much higher priority in my and your life than it is now. I want to challenge you to find a Small Group of believers to pray with, play with, grow with, laugh with and cry with this fall. For God has made us as Christians to need each other. When Peter was in trouble, they were there for him.

ii) We are called to pray with passion for each other. Looking back at verse 5, the word *ektenos* is used to describe the fact that 'they were wrestling for him in prayer'. It is used to describe stretching a muscle to its limit. They stretched their prayer muscles as far as they could and then a little more. They actually stayed up all night to pray. The result is verse 12. Prayer is work, but even when it is done poorly (they had enough faith to pray, just not enough faith to expect results) God still can use it to free prisoners. But I'll bet that at the next prayer meeting they prayed with a little more faith.

Howard Hendricks (Founder of Focus on the family) tells about how his father came to know Christ. One day, Butch Hardman was boarding a plane in Detroit when a friend handed him a cassette tape. The man said, "Ever hear Hendricks? Here's a tape you should listen to." On that tape Howard Hendricks related his father's spiritual need for Christ. Butch listened to the tape and something about it reminded him of his own father with whom he had shared Christ shortly before he died. He began to pray for this unknown man, George Hendricks. Some months later, Butch attended a pastors' conference in Philadelphia where Howard Hendricks was the speaker.

After the conference Butch was driving the church bus down the street, having discharged all

his passengers. He saw a man standing on the corner who reminded him uncannily of Howard Hendricks. Could it possibly be? He backed up the bus, stopped, got off, and went over to the man. "Are you by any chance Howard Hendricks' father?" It is easy to imagine the startled response. "Er-ah yeah -- you a student of my son?" "No, I'm not, but he sure has helped me. Got time for a cup of coffee?" the man said. That encounter began a friendship. Mr. Hendricks would drop by the office for coffee. Patiently he endured the smouldering cigars and his endless repertoire of war stories. Before long, he also learned that Mr. Hendricks had been diagnosed as having a terminal throat cancer. Months later Butch was at his bedside. "Mr. Hendricks, I'll be leaving shortly for a Holy Land trip. Instead of my listening to you tonight, would you let me tell you a story?" Butch had earned his hearing and he began simply to relate the interview of Jesus Christ with Nicodemus as recorded by the Apostle John. At the conclusion of his story, Mr. Hendricks accepted Butch's invitation to receive Jesus Christ as his own personal Saviour. That night Butch called Howard in Dallas and said 'Are you sitting down? Your dad just put his trust in Christ this evening'. Do you know Howard had prayed for his dad for 42 years? He said on the day he received the phone call he was surprised by prayer.

I have been surprised how I have been drawn to this passage this week and what I felt I needed to say. I feel God is saying that:

1. This fall, we shouldn't be surprised by the enemy's attack.
2. This fall, we shouldn't be surprised by the fact that God has some amazing things in store for us that will cause us to need to pitch ourselves like Peter did and say God is good. God is so good.
3. This fall, we are called to be people who care for each other and pray for each other and when we do, we will be surprised by prayer and what happens through it.

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